

Bob Dylan Stabler Arena April 18 2013

What a difference six days, a better hall, much better seats and frankly a more cultured audience can make. The Bob Dylan concert tonight in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania was superior to Friday's show in Newark, Delaware in every way.

We arrived to find the seating chart didn't come close to letting us know how good our seats were on the left, exactly at stage level right next to the stage, and in the first row above the floor where no one could possibly block the view.

Immediately the difference in sound was noticeable with opening band Dawes. Where they literally got lost in the reverberating mush, tonight they were clear and you could hear what a good and talented band they actually are. The harmonies between Taylor and Griffin Goldsmith were on, and the song "A Little Bit of Everything" is nothing short of amazing. Tonight, they made me want to get their records.

So a little before 8:30 pm, in darkness. Stu Kimball started strumming an acoustic guitar while they band took their spots on stage. As the strumming stopped and "Things Have Changed Kicked Off, the lights went on to reveal a hatless Bob Dylan standing center stage, wearing a black suit with red piping on the pants, and a bolero tie with a shirt open at the collar. Duke Robillard was playing a white Fender Telecaster with a black pickguard and immediately stepped out on the song with two driving solos. The energy level was high, and stayed that way for "Love Sick" which featured the first of many excellent Bob solos. Dylan was leaning into and also leaning on the microphone stand as if it was a corner lamp post emphasizing lines like You're dancin' with whom they tell you to or you don't dance at ALL! Robillard provided an extremely funky solo at the end.

Then Bob moved to the piano for "Soon After Midnight," which he played standing up. He would start each verse singing softly, almost tenderly getting harder as the verse went on and then it was back to soft and tender. Donnie Herron's pedal steel was beautiful and Duke's guitar part was right out of Santo & Johnny's "Sleepwalk."

"Early Roman Kings" took the show straight to Chicago, with Donnie's slide on lap steel getting spookier on each verse.

"Tangled Up In Blue" moved the show into high gear. This arrangement may be the best live band arrangement yet. Again Bob would start each verse singing the first two lines softly, and then as it

got to the second part of the verse the band would build it up and Dylan would get harder and rougher right up through the end, and then it would come down again and start all over. Robillard again took two excellent solos, the second of which was way more charged, but it was also on "Tangled" that the interplay between Robillard's lead and Herron's pedal steel and that they were actually doubling their parts, and they'd break away and join together again. And it may have been during this song I realized something about the current stage set up. While the drums are kind of in the center, the rhythm section is on the left (looking at the stage) and the lead players are on the right side of the stage.

A very strong "Pay In Blood" followed, with the dynamics of the new arrangement becoming more pronounced making it quite clear that this song is moving towards being one of the show pieces of the set much the way that "Cold Iron Bounds" was the show piece about a decade ago. It's not quite there yet, but tonight's version and extremely spooky steel with Bob putting intense emphasis on the lyrics while the interplay between Robillard and Herron again was quite evident.

"Visions of Johanna" was simply excellent and this may have been the best version of the song I've seen live. Robillard was playing very sweet almost Steve Cropper fills, and Bob was singing it as if he had just discovered how good the lyrics were putting emphasis on certain lines and words in a low rumbling voice: "You can tell by the way she smiiiiillled" or "Make it all seem so cruelllllll." But it was also happening in the music. Following the last verse there was an extended instrumental that culminated in a guitar/mandolin duet.

"Spirit On The Water" was equally strong. Sometimes this song can drag, but not tonight with Dylan again alternating between soft and hard vocals and being particularly intense on the lines, "I can't go back to paradise no more/I killed a man back there." However, it was on the harp solo, I realized something that is different about this band. Duke Robillard is the first guitarist in ages to play a solo while Dylan is taking a harp solo in a very long time. He plays underneath the harp volume wise, but he's definitely soloing and often echoes what Dylan is playing. But also on this song again the interaction between Herron and Robillard became even more clear. For years, one of Donnie Herron's roles in the band is to watch what Dylan is playing and pass it to the band, and the band would riff on whatever lick it was, and sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't. Since Dylan switched to a grand piano, what he's playing on the piano is much more defined. Now what happens is the rhythm section remains the rhythm section, the riff is passed to Robillard to then

engages is call and response with whatever instrument Herron is playing and then Dylan joins in all three are truly jamming.

Then came one of the night's most amazing moments on of all songs, "Beyond Here Lies Nothing." One the song kicked off with incredible force with Dylan returning to center stage. But when Dylan put the harp to his mouth, he blew the first note with such incredible power and force that I literally said "Holy fuck!" But that wasn't all. He played a harp solo that was so insanely wild with Robillard right there with him that it was beyond belief. It was more than something. I mean this kind of Dylan harp and lead guitar craziness has not been heard in this way since 1966. And then after singing another verse, he did it again. It was truly as if Bob Dylan was saying fuck this age shit. My friend Jack whispered to me, "A 72-year-old man is not supposed to be doing that." The entire arena was going crazy, all eyes were on the stage. And I believe it was at the end of this song while the applause that someone behind me shouted out, "That was some good shit, Bob!" Being right next to the stage, there was no way Dylan and the rest of the band didn't hear it.

This was followed by and equally strong "Blind Willie McTell" with more harp and guitar and Dylan throwing extra emphasis on such lines as "The stars above the barren trees were his only audience," and even stronger on "Power and greed and corruptible seed seems to be ALL THAT THERE IS.

A powerful "What Good Am I Followed" with Dylan playing beautiful piano. It was reminiscent of the piano interludes on "Sign On The Window" from New Morning. It was also on this song that the first talker of the night appeared right below me. Luckily a quick, "I can hear you" shut up silenced him. Luckily, I didn't have to pull a Neil Young and dump my bottle of water on his head which I was in the perfect physical position to do.

"Thunder On The Mountain" followed and prior to this tour, I was fairly ambivalent about this song. But on this tour it's turned into something. About midway through I realized what Donnie Herron is doing is playing horn parts on the pedal steel. And I was close enough to see that he was having a great time doing it. And he has this amazing ability to play that horn lick, pull back just provide ambient sounds, then jump back in and do it again at the right moment, and then Robillard joined in and then Bob joined in, and Tony took a solo and this wasn't at all guitar noodling, they were all answering each other and they were totally smoking.

An excellent Scarlet Town followed, which set the atmosphere for the closer "All Along The Watchtower." When "All Along The Watchtower" first appeared on *John Wesley Harding*, it was at the time the spookiest song Dylan had done. (Some songs on the *Basement Tapes* were equally spooky, but no one knew about them.) And finally onstage it is spooky again, in the arrangement, in the way Dylan sings it and in the leads Duke Robillard plays which seem to get hotter each night. Tonight at the end, instead of repeating the last verse the bring it down low and again there is serious interaction going on between Dylan, Robillard and Herron, before the build it back up to a crashing conclusion.

"Ballad of A Thin Man" ended at the night with Dylan sitting at the piano, the way he wrote it, the way he first performed it. And while the center stage performances of it the past few years where he kind of acted out the song were certainly enjoyable, gone is the unnecessary echo of his voice that frankly was never necessary and more gimmicky than anything.

For several years, I can't remember when it started, Dylan tours were billed as "The Bob Dylan Show." And it was a show though the show varied with lighting, one tour with video images behind the band. Now it is back to being a Bob Dylan concert and it is back to being more than anything about the songs and delivering those songs so the songs stand out. It's not about the set lists. It's about taking this particular group of songs, the majority of which are from the later part of Dylan's 50 year career and playing them so the songs stand out and so the performance of those songs gets better every night. And for those grumbling about the "static set lists," in 1966, Bob Dylan played the same set every night. Same for the fall tour in 1965 with one or two exceptions. The same for the Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975 where the only songs to change were the two solo acoustic ones and the duets with Baez. And the same for 1979 and a good deal of 1980. It's not about the set list. It's about the performance.

The difference between tonight's show in Bethlehem and the show I saw six days ago was night and day. The Bob Carpenter Center in Newark Delaware simply should not be used for music concerts. The sound problems are too severe. But also the audience at Stabler was clearly there to see Bob Dylan and hear music. Not only that, the hall was close to full when Dawes started their set which wasn't the case in Newark. In Newark, you couldn't help but feel that a good portion of the audience was there because it was the thing to do, what was happening in town that night.

But tonight in Bethlehem, something else became very clear. Duke Robillard is easily one of the best guitarists Bob Dylan has had. He simply knows what to do and just as important, he knows what not to do. There were more guitar solos tonight by the lead guitarist of the band than I can remember at any Dylan concert for 25 years. And there is more interaction going on between the band members, and particularly between Dylan, Robillard and Herron than in any other band since 1966.

Tonight at Stabler Arena, Bob Dylan and his band were on from the first note to the last. They started strong and never let up. There wasn't one point at which I thought not this song again or anything close to that. I found myself yelling out and cheering throughout the night. I found myself yelling out and cheering throughout the night. I'm not sure the last time that happened. After the show we just stood there near our seats in the arena talking about it for at least a half hour, maybe longer while the crew tore down the stage. When we finally left there was no post-concert traffic jam. Tonight was simply one of the best concerts I've seen on what is commonly referred to as "The Never Ending Tour." It moved instantly near the top. And as I write this since it is now a few hours into the next day, I am seven months and 11 days away from the 50th anniversary of my first Dylan concert. I wouldn't have thought it possible at this stage in the game, but Bob Dylan in every way was BOB DYLAN tonight in the hills of the Lehigh Valley.